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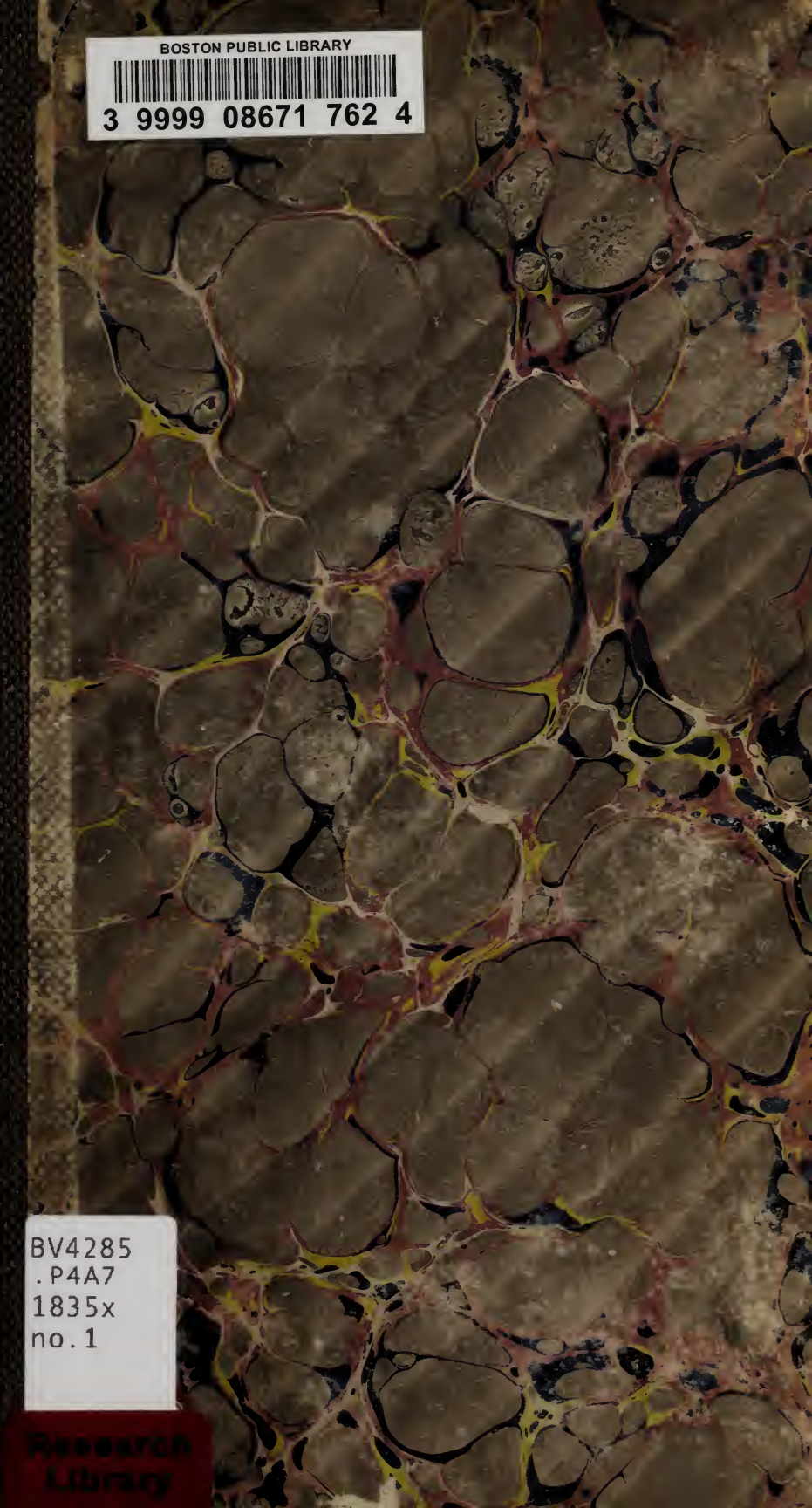

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THE WORK OF THE MINISTRY.

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A SERMON

PREACHED

BEFORE THE GRADUATING CLASS

OF THE

MEADVILLE THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

AT MEADVILLE, PA.

JUNE 26, 1850.

BY ANDREW P. PEABODY,

PASTOR OF THE SOUTH CHURCH IN PORTSMOUTH, N.H.

Published by Request of the Class.

BOSTON:
WM. CROSBY AND H. P. NICHOLS,
111, WASHINGTON STREET.
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SERMON.

Ephesians, iv. 12. — The work of the Ministry.

It is certainly very appropriate, that, in connection with the services of this anniversary, a word of affectionate counsel should be offered to our young brethren by one who knows from experience the life and calling on which they hope soon to enter. I come before you with the simple claim to your respectful hearing, which the experience of a permanent and active ministry may give me; and, in virtue of that claim, I propose to help you in answering the questions, What is the work of the ministry? How is it to be successfully wrought?

I. What is the work of the ministry? This is not so simple a question as it appears at first sight; for equally devoted ministers give it two answers, — the one indeed including, but immeasurably transcending, the other. Perhaps I can best illustrate them by the example of two of the holiest and most useful men of modern times, Whitfield and Wesley, the leaders of the great Methodist reformation of the last century:

the former endowed with a more extensive personal religious influence than any man since the days of the apostles; the latter the author of a system of ecclesiastical administration, second certainly to none in this country, as to the extent and cogency of its hold upon the general mind, and the zeal of its ministers and members. Whitfield, in his capacity of Christian teacher, seems to have regarded himself as the pilot of a life-boat for the conveyance of successive freights of souls, by an almost momentary passage, across the river of spiritual death; and he left his passengers on the opposite shore, down at the very water's edge, where he thought them safe, because in his theory no soul could recross the stream. To Wesley's eye, even the right shore was full of slippery places, and those who lingered there were quite sure to fall into the river. He therefore, after ferrying his passengers across, led them away from the bank and up the hill, and made the furnishing of means and motives for constant progress the great purpose of all his ecclesiastical arrangements. Or, without a figure, the conversion of sinners was Whitfield's sole aim; while Wesley sought equally "the perfecting of the saints, the edifying of the body of Christ."

When you enter, my young brethren, on the active duties of your profession, you will see around you multitudes of the indifferent, the worldly, the dead in trespasses and sins; and month after month the grave will close over those who have lived without Christ, and who die without hope. For such persons, if you have the spirit of your Master, your souls will yearn

with tender solicitude. Direct appeals to their consciences, pungent representations of their guilt and peril, of the solemnities of the approaching judgment, and the fearful retributions of eternity, will rightly constitute the burden of much of your preaching; and you may feel, that, so long as you have such souls among your hearers, there is nothing for you to do but to preach repentance, and to cry, "Turn ye, turn ye; for why will ye die?" But, so sure as you make this your sole work, this very work will not prosper under your hands. The terrors of the law, by their constant reiteration, will cease to give alarm. The incessant exhortation to repentance will fall upon accustomed and sluggish ears as a mere pulpit formula. Your converts, suffered to believe that a brief agony of contrition may make them heirs of heaven, will establish an excessively low and faulty standard of Christian character; and it will be constantly asked concerning them, "What do they more than others?" There will be little in their lives to attract attention, to win respect and reverence, and to induce those around them to say, "We too will join you, for we see that God is with you." There may be occasional seasons of awakening, when you may be permitted to welcome a goodly company to your Christian fellowship; but the remembrance of every such season will be clouded by the entire apostasy of some who promised to run well, and by the extremely defective characters of many more, who retain the Christian name only to dishonor it. And every time of refreshing will be followed by a long period of drought and

dearth, when the heavens will seem as brass to your prayers, and the earth as powder and dust, on account of the utter worldliness of those in the church, as well as out of it.

Let me beg you, then, to aim at sanctification, no less than at conversion. Regard your work with the individual as not done, but just begun, when he has sought his peace with God. Look at the apostles, when at nightfall they meet their Master around the paschal table, with professions of the warmest attachment and the most devoted love; and, the very next day, one denies him, and all forsake him and flee, carrying from his cross only broken resolutions and vain regrets. Look at the same apostles, after the tongues of fire have rested upon them, and the spirit of the living God has been shed abroad in their hearts. See them glorying in infirmity, rejoicing in tribulation, singing praises in the prison-house, filled with the love of Christ, thankful for the privilege of suffering in his name, their countenances glowing like angels' faces as they sink under deadly missiles, their parched lips raising the song of triumph as they perish at the stake or on the cross. What a heaven-wide distance between these two conditions of character, — between their feeble infancy and their vigorous manhood as Christians! It is over this distance, up these serene heights of spiritual attainment, on which the sun of righteousness never sets, that you are to lead the flocks of which the holy spirit may make you overseers. Every Christian, who is thus moving onward and upward, becomes your colleague in the

ministry, — a living testimony to the excellency of the divine word, to the reality and power of religion; while the converts, whom you barely help through the washing of regeneration, and leave at the margin of the cleansing stream, are clogs upon your success, a reproach to the cause of Christ, lying witnesses, who do all that they can to convince the world that no fountain has been opened for sin and uncleanness.

I have spoken of the necessity of a high standard of Christian character, in deprecation of the inordinate stress sometimes laid on the first processes of conversion. The same standard needs also to be urged with reference to the demands of our age on philanthropic activity. In many quarters, the second commandment of the law is put before the first. The maxim is, "Do good that you may be good;" not, as it should be, "Be good that you may do good." Those who have never mortified a single lust or passion lead the assault against giant evils and inveterate wrongs. Men of unwashen hands and hearts are set to wash the hands and cleanse the hearts of others. This spirit favors a low and paltry type of ministerial character. The minister is often expected to be, for the most part, a manager of social utilities, a wire-puller of beneficent agencies. His work must all be such as will make a show; not that wrought for the eye of God in the hidden man of the heart.

There are very many who estimate every trait of character by the quantity of outward service that it can render, — by the amount of visible grinding that it can accomplish in the mill of social reform; and,

tried by this test, the higher attributes of the spiritual life — gratitude, prayer, devout contemplation, heavenly communings — are so sadly undervalued, that your preacher may be pardoned for saying a few words in behalf of them, as, even more than external philanthropy, a prime object of ministerial effort. Now, I freely admit that there are many traits of the mature Christian character, which, in their own form, produce no visible results. They do not enable the poor to bestow costly gifts, or the feeble to perform vast enterprises, or those of slender ability to startle or electrify by tongue or pen. But how would it answer to apply this low utilitarian standard to the outward universe? There, with numberless provisions for immediate use, there are objects no less numberless, of which their intrinsic excellence and beauty are the only use. The breath of spring unfolds not only the blossoms that will turn into fruit, but wayside and forest flowers of every hue, that simply reflect the smile of a benignant Providence, and then intrust to the genial earth the promise of the same smile, when spring-days come again. The waters, too, are not only gathered where man and beast may quench their thirst, or spread into rivers and oceans that bear the freight of human industry, or poured where in their fall they may propel the mill-wheel; but they leap in many a fountain at which the cup is never filled, and sparkle in many a cascade where they can only refresh and gladden the soul attuned to the harmonies of nature. Thus, in God's spiritual creation, there are attributes of character which are fully seen

and fully used in the economy of outward life; and there are yet others whose first and chief use is that they make the soul itself richer and happier, ally it with higher orders of beings, and render it more fully the reflection of the Creator's countenance.

Yet I cannot forbear expressing my confident belief, that these hidden excellencies of the devout heart are essential to the strength, permanence, and purity of what are called the useful virtues. The spring must be fed from unseen sources; and when it leaps and bubbles fresh, cool, and clear, it indicates a source higher than its level. The navigable river, the fall that turns the mill, is made deep and strong by forest-rills, that carry no freight; by mountain-torrents, too wild and vagrant for industrial uses. Stop the source, — the fountain stagnates. Cut off the rill, — the boat is stranded on the river's bed. Arrest the torrent, — the wheel stands still. Equally little can the useful, philanthropic virtues be sustained without those attributes that belong to the hidden life. There is indeed, at the present day, a great deal of professed philanthropy, where faith and reverence are wanting; but I have yet to know the first consistent philanthropist, who is not also, so far as human judgment can determine, a devout man. Those self-styled friends of their race who neglect or undervalue the peculiar duties of religion are either partial in their charity, warm in some causes of humanity, and indifferent or hostile to others no less sacred; or else their zeal is a flickering torch, a revolving light; or else they blend with much that is good much bitterness

and rancor of spirit, so that "out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing." The reason of this is, that a hidden well-spring of piety toward God, a constant inflow of that spirit of power and love which comes in answer to prayer, is needed to keep the fountain of charity sweet and pure. Without it, love to man grows languid; what was heart-work becomes mere tongue or hand-work; and, as tongue or hand grows weary, it either sinks into utter inertness, or, if kept in motion by habit or external pressure, works peevishly and fretfully, because reluctantly. While, therefore, I grant that piety does not show its whole self to the world, or coin its whole self into daily utilities, or empty its whole self in common calls of duty, I cannot but believe that a thoroughly worthy and beneficent life owes its consistency and beauty to the fact, that there is much within, which can be fully manifested only when Christ, our life, shall appear, and his disciples shall appear with him in glory.

The fitness of a minister's laying constant stress on the higher and more hidden attributes of the inward life will be manifest, when we reflect that every man has not only a social, but an independent, solitary existence; not only joint, but separate interests. It is too much the fashion of the times to regard men as mere agencies or instrumentalities, made solely for one another, solely for society, solely to fit each into his peculiar niche in the body politic. We are, indeed, members one of another; but we are none the less each of us a living soul, with elements of being all his own. Indeed the very idea of mutual useful-

ness implies this; for, if we are mere utilities, who or what is to have the ultimate benefit of our combined utility? We are bound to do good to others, chiefly because every one is capable of receiving, absorbing, appropriating to his own sole use and benefit, the good that he receives from others; because every one is in his own nature independently capable of improvement, excellence, and happiness. Doing is not the whole of life, nor well-doing the whole of duty. Being and well-being are even more essential. How much is there of life which cannot be spent in doing; hours of thoughtful solitude when the soul must be turned in upon itself, and self-consciousness is all of which we are capable! At such times, the consciousness that we are useful, precious as it is, is not enough. We want to be conscious, that we are more than beneficent machines; that we have an inward life, exclusively our own, — a life of thought, sentiment, emotion, and hope, independent of society and sympathy. And it is in the growth of this inward life, far beyond all power of external manifestation, that the perfecting of the saints in its higher stages consists.

I have thus endeavored to place before you, my brethren, the loftiest aim as regards the characters of those to whom you may be called to minister. Think not that I would underrate the labors which are too prone to usurp all a minister's energy. You must and should call sinners to repentance, and through you should the violated law speak out its thunders. You ought to be devotedly engaged in philanthropic

enterprises, to take them into the bosom of the church, to make them an essential part of her work, and to do all in your power to create within her a spirit which shall supersede all other organizations, and merge the separate societies and agencies for reform in the "peculiar people zealous of good works." Yet most of all would I have you lend your efforts to the perfecting of the saints, — to the full and symmetrical education of the souls intrusted to your care, — to the creating within them, not of one, but of every, class of spiritual graces; so that their knowledge shall be equal to their zeal, and their faith worthy of their works; so that in them piety and charity shall seem not twain, but one and the same tree of life, which men shall call piety as it takes root in the clefts of the Rock of ages, and charity as it sends out its branches laden with refreshing blossoms and healing fruit.

II. Such being the work of the ministry, how is it to be wrought successfully? To this question permit me first to give the answer, which is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." It is to be wrought only by the prepared heart, by the truly devout and thoroughly devoted spirit, by him whose whole character is a preaching of the gospel. The life and spirit of Christ are not dogmatic facts, but dynamic forces, — the great motive-power for the heart of humanity. They instruct men only by working in them. They give knowledge in proportion as they create experience. The minister is less the teacher of

his flock, than the conductor of these regenerating forces, this transforming power. Only life can quicken life. The sap from the living, alone, can re-invigorate the graft from the dying, tree.

In our climate, the germs of vegetable life lie dormant through the winter, — the rudiments of foliage, blossoms, and fruit hidden in the knots and forks of bald, bare boughs and twigs. But, when the all-quickening sun broods again over the northern hemisphere, beneath his rays the leaf-buds swell; the buried seeds expand and burst; new life throbs in the veins of every tree, and heaves the bosom of the teeming earth. In like manner, through the spirit, example, and influence of a consecrated ministry, does the gospel rise on the germs of religious life in the heart of man. The germs are there; but how often shrunken, dormant, dry, to human appearance winter-killed! Yet there they are, — the power of a love broad as the universe, of trust implicit as an infant's, of energy like an archangel's, of devotion like that of the adoring spirits before the eternal throne. But in the common experience of life, in the hard conflict and scrambling of those who strive for gain or for the mastery, these lofty capacities are overlooked; thick clods of earthly care weigh down the precious seed; it can find no room to germinate, no space to grow. To such persons, the written gospel, nay, the uttered word, when uttered as a mere pulpit formalism, is like a sun shining over another zone. But let them meet, in their homes and on their daily walks, one pervaded with the spirit of Christ, whose coun-

tenance bears the tokens of heavenly communings, whose speech has the rich unction which a Christian heart alone can give; let them hear from the pulpit, and from house to house, the unaffected, earnest tones of a Christ-like love; let them mark the still more persuasive spectacle of an example entirely conformed to the gospel pattern, — then is the sun of righteousness reflected upon their hemisphere, its rays concentrated upon their souls, and, by means of the minister who thus bears about with him the venerable image of his Master, they may find their worldliness rebuked, their torpid consciences aroused, and their souls renewed through him who is "the power and the wisdom of God unto salvation."

But think not, my brethren, that a mere intellectual purpose, a simple resolution to be faithful, can be of the slightest avail. You have not even the religious knowledge requisite for your work, except through profound spiritual experience. Your theological studies simply acquaint you with words and names, outward phenomena, and historical facts. You inwardly know only what you have lived, what you have experienced. You know the love of God and Christ, only when your own love has been purged from selfishness, and aroused from inaction; when you can do good, hoping for nothing again; when you have learned to bear other men's burdens, and to help their infirmities. You know the divine purity, only when you have cast out from your hearts all impure desires and affections, all mean and grovelling tastes, all the defilements of sense and sin; when your souls,

sincere, transparent, and serene, reflect an untroubled image of the divine countenance, as tranquil waters mirror back the moon and the stars. You know what regeneration is, only when you have consecrated your whole being to the service of God, and opened your whole heart to the promptings of his spirit; when the constant language of your souls is, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth: Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" Without this heart-knowledge, you may mean to be a faithful preacher, a son of consolation, a helper of your fellow-men up those heights of spiritual attainment to which you think that you know every step of the way; but the lack of personal experience will mar your best efforts, and make void your most faithful services. You may seem to say just what you ought; and yet, because it comes from the head and not from the heart, it will reach the head only, and fall short of the heart.

Preaching must be the expression, not only of the preacher's sincere convictions, but of his inward life and character; else the truest and holiest words are unattended by the demonstration of the divine spirit and by power from on high. Why this is we cannot perhaps say. Nor yet can we say what it is that touches the heart, and awakens peculiarly devout sentiments, in the contemplation of the works of nature, and not in that of their fairest and most literal copies. Art may counterfeit the bloom of summer, nay more, may plant gorgeous parterres of tropical flowers and fruit-trees under the very ribs of winter; but no art of man can impart to its imitations or its

forced growth the incense-breathing element, the aroma of praise and worship, that goes up when God renews the face of the year. Equally little can factitious sanctity, the set purpose to say the best things at the fit time and in the right way, the most skilful imitation of the beauty of holiness, counterfeit the utterances that flow warm from the heart habitually communing with the divine spirit, and receiving from the Lord what it delivers to the Lord's heritage.

Let me, then, earnestly beseech you to take heed to yourselves, — to watch over your own souls. Remember that it is not your pen or tongue, but your spirit and character, that are to do your Master's work. You yourselves, — not what you have learned or what you say, but what you are, — you yourselves are your choicest instruments of usefulness. Other things being equal, your success will depend on your depth of experience, your quantity of character, the measure of the fulness of Christ's spirit that has been poured into yours. Therefore let not your time be all frittered away even in the external work of the ministry, or your leisure be all consumed even in theological study: for, in that case, you will be only Gibeonites, — burden-bearers in the outer courts of the sanctuary; you cannot approach the holy of holies; you will have no incense in your censers, — no fire on the heart-altar. Remember the lone nights passed on the mountain by Him who spake as never man spake; and if he, who dwelt ever in the bosom of the Father, needed prolonged seasons of prayer, and felt the benefit of retired communion with Heaven,

how much more deeply must this need exist in us, his feeble and far-off followers, encompassed by like infirmities with other men, and beset by one danger peculiar to our profession, — that of having our reverence for sacred things impaired by the necessity of handling them critically, analyzing them, and considering them in their technical aspects and relations! Seek, then, the lone hour. Cherish habitual communion with your own souls and your God. Ascend the mount of clear vision, where the soul asserts its power of direct perception, — sees God, Christ, and truth with the inward eye, as clearly as we see forms and colors with the outward. Preach nothing that you have not prayed over, — nothing that does not identify itself with your heart-experience; and, whether you minister at the public altar, carry the regenerating word from house to house, or pour the consolations of your Saviour's love into the ear of the sick and dying, let thoughts of prayer, the tacit appeal for the divine aid and blessing, flow on in even rhythm, in harmonious symphony with your utterance. Thus shall your word be with power, the witness of your ministry in heaven, and its record on high.

But I should do great injustice to this occasion, if, while assigning the first place to the preparation of the heart, I did not also urge upon you the necessity of thorough and various mental culture, up to the full measure of your means and ability. Is it said that the message of divine truth needs not man's learning or wisdom? Still less does it need man's ignorance and folly. Is it said that the gospel can well dispense

with all extraneous adorning? It can equally dispense with the awkward handling of those who have not trained themselves rightly to divide the word of truth. All knowledge is or may be knowledge of God. Of his ideas whatever exists is the copy; whatever takes place is the expression. He breathes in all nature. He writes all history. He leads the march of events, no less than the stars in their circuits. There is no department of creation, no portion of the record of the past, that may not nourish the devout mind, and enrich the pious heart. The Scriptures, too, present not only words which he that runs may read, but hidden treasures, which he only that digs can find. And in them we always find more than we seek. He who digs for silver gets gold; he who searches for gold unearths diamonds.

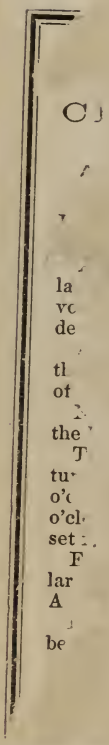
I would beg you, chief of all, and for your lives long, to dig in this mine. Make yourselves mighty in the Scriptures. They are your source, your authority. So long as you regard them as the authentic records of divine revelation, it concerns you to enter with the most thorough critical research into the minds of their writers, to compare Scripture with Scripture, and to throw upon the sacred text all the light which science, history, and philology can furnish.

But while scriptural knowledge alone may commend you to the devout mind, you must, in ministering to the worldly, the careless, the merely intellectual, have points of contact with them through your conversance with subjects in which they are already interested. St. Paul won the regard of his Athenian

hearers by quoting from one of their own poets. You may often gain a respectful hearing on the great themes of the gospel, by your recognized learning or wisdom on themes of a widely different class. Men may join you by the wayside of life, only to commune of earthly things; and you may lead them on and up, till they are prepared to sit with you in heavenly places, and to talk of redeeming love. There is also, alike in nature and art, literature and science, an indefinite field for the illustration of religious truth. Every department of human knowledge has its rich gifts for the sanctuary, and sends its polished stones for the building of the spiritual temple. Science tests and strengthens the evidences of revelation. History illustrates the truth of its doctrines, and the working of its laws, in the fate of nations and empires. Biography, in its every page, is fraught with religious example or warning. Classical literature sheds light on the interpretation of Scripture; while the literature of Christendom is a gauge, on which we may trace from century to century the ever higher water-mark of the river of salvation.

In this connection, I would remind you that a great deal of the traditional reverence for religious institutions has passed away. I wish it were not so. But the preacher is no longer sure of his audience because the service-hour has come round. He must win, must often fight, his way to a full and fair hearing. He must compete for the public ear with thronging, pressing interests of a lower character. The tendency to worldliness is now intensely strong,

enhanced as it is by the rapid intercourse which pervades the whole known world. Every pulsation of political or mercantile life beats almost simultaneously through Europe and America. The courts and markets, the counsels and speculations, of all nations, are laid open to every one's speedy cognizance. Thus do men and women have their attention perpetually occupied, their curiosity continually excited, while rumor treads on the heels of rumor, and yesterday's news is made old by the crowded budget of to-day. And on all these secular subjects there are intelligent, earnest, fervent appeals constantly made to the public mind through the press and the living voice. Meanwhile, no post has come from the spirit-land for these eighteen hundred years. No fluctuation in the value of the pearl of great price invites the buyer's heed at one time more than another. The last gazette from those regions was issued ages ago, and the dust of antiquity rests on their most recent tidings. Therefore is there need of every good gift which learning can bring, which eloquence can offer, which the divine spirit can sanctify, in order that religion may utter her queenly voice, hold her commanding place, and, in the very temple of the god of this world, cast down his idols and deface his altars.

My young brethren, I might add many topics of advice. I would gladly say many words of congratulation and encouragement. But it is time that I draw to a close. You now go forth as heralds of the cross. You bear an honored name. You take your places in the great procession, at the head of which stand

confessors, martyrs, apostles, the all-perfect Redeemer. On him fix the eye of your faith. Preach not yourselves, but Christ. Feel sure and strong, only where you can quote a "Thus saith the Lord." Plant your feet where his sacred footmarks lie. It was throughout, when he trod it, a rough and thorny path, though now, at frequent intervals, instead of the thorn is the fir-tree, instead of the briar the myrtle. On that sheltered way, lead the flocks that may be given to your care. Rely on the word of promise, "Lo, I am with you alway." And, if there shall be trials and discouragements on your course, oh! think of the blessedness of leading souls to Jesus, of being to your fellow-men the fathers of their spiritual birth, the authors under God of that life over which death has no power, of having among the shining ranks of the redeemed those who shall say, "You helped us hither; your piety kindled ours; your loyalty to your Master made us say, 'We too would see Jesus;' your counsels cheered, your example guided us; we were seals of your ministry on earth, and will for ever cluster around you as the crown of your joy in heaven." Yet more; if of merely feeding and clothing the dying body of a fellow-mortal, how much rather of these offices of love for the undying soul, will Jesus say, "Inasmuch as ye did this unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me"!